

JAZZ REVIEW

Reliving the Heyday of Kansas City Swing

By BEN RATLIFF

It is the beginning of the second year for Jazz at Lincoln Center's new home at Columbus Circle, but the 15th year since the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra became the institution's resident jazz band. The second statistic is the more meaningful.

In "K.C. and the Count," Thursday night's season-opening concert at Rose Theater, Wynton Marsalis and the orchestra played through 18 tunes associated either with Count Basie and his sidemen or with Harlan Leonard, one of Basie's rivals in the competitive 1930's Kansas City jazz scene. It was the kind of concert that Mr. Marsalis and his band have elevated to a potent formula; it had the organic power of something that has been shined over nearly a generation, and in playing music like this the band has no peer. (The concert was also part of a larger Kansas City Festival on the premises, through the weekend, including concerts in

all its three theaters.)

In the older Basie of 1935 to 1950, the rhythm-section engine room was the thing — crisp, tight grooves in perfectly chosen tempos. In later Basie bands, from 1952 to Basie's death in 1984 and beyond, when it was taken under the hand of different leaders, it tended more toward

The Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra opens the season with a retrospective of Count Basie.

vaulting reed-and-brass sections and extremes of dynamics. And for all the years of his involvement, Basie's drawling, severely edited piano style was a sly constant. So it boils down to three problems to worry about, then. The band solved them all.

For early Basie and 1930's Kansas City — as well as the Basie spinoff groups of the time — the concert included "Dickie's Dream," "Good Morning Blues" and three tunes writ-

ten by Tadd Dameron for Leonard's band: "400 Swing," "Rock and Ride" and the mannered romantic ballad "A La Bridges." There were two guests from Basie's own band. Clark Terry came out to play and sing on "I Want a Little Girl," and his details were beautiful — relaxed, pearly, rhythmically pointed. The saxophonist Frank Wess played precise upper-midrange improvisations through "I Know That You Know," and gathered steam over many choruses through "Lester Leaps In."

For later Basie, there was "The Golden Bullet," "Neal's Deal" and Ernie Wilkin's 1950's revision of the early Basie standard "Moten Swing." That one had a cruel twist, and the band made the most of the cruelty: the arrangement began with extreme quiet and one of Basie's slowest, strolling tempos, the drummer only tapping on a clenched high-hat. Then there were two thunderous chords, like a hammer to the sternum, before the tune whispered along as before.

The pianist for the night was Dan Nimmer, a newcomer. (In March, he became a member of Mr. Marsalis's smaller band, a quintet; he played his first show with the orchestra at the "Higher Ground" hurricane relief concert last week.) And he was game for the challenges: fast, dense sequences of boogie-woogie and swing

K.C. and the Count

Rose Hall

and then, suddenly, glacial silences. His biggest crowd response, in fact, came at two bars that he didn't play: silence is always underrated in jazz.

The band's new drummer this season is Ali Jackson, whom New York is used to, or should be; he's been playing in town for a decade, sometimes in various types of Jazz at Lincoln Center shows. Herlin Riley, who really defined the orchestra's rhythm-section sound through the 90's, will be missed, but his replacement is serious business. The concert started with "Dickie's Dream," a late-30's Basie small-group piece, and Mr. Jackson stepped right into it, commandeering the beat so much that he made it almost funky; James Chirillo played the chopped rhythm-guitar chords. That whole small piece, in fact, was nearly perfect: Mr. Marsalis, Walter Blanding Jr. on tenor saxophone and Wycliffe Gordon on trombone all gave solos that rose above their small spaces. Mr. Gordon, especially, knows how to make an impression. For his entire fast, slangy solo, he used a mute, except for the very last note, which was a quick, upward, unmuted rip.



Heidi Schumann for The New York Times

Clark Terry, a past member of Count Basie's band, played Thursday with Wynton Marsalis, left, and the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra.

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"K.C. and the Count" repeats tonight at 8 at Rose Hall, 60th Street and Broadway, (212) 721-6500. Information about other shows in Jazz at Lincoln Center's weekend-long "Kansas City Festival" is available at www.jazzatlincolncenter.org.